

Somalia: A Crisis of Command

Muktar M Omer
muktaromer@ymail.com

30 May 2013

The cause and effect debate

As the dispute between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the self-declared Jubaland Regional State (JRS) intensified, the national debate reverberated with matching intensity.

Pro-Jubaland politicians and media traced the source of the impasse to the ambitions of an overbearing central government attempting to overrule the outcomes of a legitimate and indigenous political process – whose start preceded the current Federal Government – and painted the President of the Somali Federal Government, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, as a ‘sectarian’ leader wearing national robes. The constitutional ‘expertise’ of President Faroole of Puntland was sought to corroborate this claim. Faroole did not disappoint. He hastily organized a Press conference and, brandishing a hardcopy of the Federal Constitution, accused the Federal Government of tampering with key articles of the Constitution; found it guilty; and passed a judgment, without waiting for the defendant to respond. This narrative continued: Kenya is not the problem; the problem is domestic.

Anti-Jubaland politicians and media gave a different account. The impasse over Kismaayo is the result of a political battle between a national government trying to reassert its authority and a foreign-sponsored militia seeking a Bantustan state in the southern peripheries of Somalia. The long-standing political desire of a “footloose clan” must not be allowed to derail the reconstitution of the Somali State. The recent Kismaayo problem is a mere continuation of two-decades-old foreign meddling by neighbouring countries. There can be no Somalia State, if regional powers do not stop interfering in its internal affairs. The President and his advisors pushed this narrative. Mohamud M. Ulusow – an otherwise respected political commentator – was called in for lasting shimmer. Ulusow firmly located the problem at the doorstep of IGAD, and with that, the externalization of Somalia’s ailment was completed.

Sidetracks

The distracting sidetracks also continued in other fronts. The problem was traced to constitutional ambiguity. The Constitution does not say “two or more regional administrations can form a regional state”; it says “two or more regions can form a regional state,” some argued. Others disagreed.

Solutions were tendered through proposals of statutory amendments. The fact that even if the Parliament clarifies how regional states are to be formed, and even if governors are nominated by the Federal Government, these processes will only transfer the conflict from the regions to the stage of the parliament, as long as there are simmering and open clan and sub-clan mistrusts, is missed. The problem of some clans claiming to have been excluded will continue whatever the design of the process, because different sides would want to impose their preferred governors.

Somalia: A Crisis of Command: By Muktar M Omer
Copyright © 2013 WardheerNews, All rights reserved

Groups who did not get the governors they wanted will still cry foul, if the appointed governors are accused of siding with a particular sub-clan once the establishment of regional states starts. In an already divided parliament, this will only fuel the already chronic schismatic politics and will reinvigorate Somalia's "old destructive pathology": tribalism.

Of scapegoats and scarecrows

Amid all this, IGAD sent a mission to Kismaayo. The mission's recommendations incontestably supported the position of the Government. But it also shifted the center of blame-game from Addis Ababa and Nairobi to Mogadishu and Kismaayo.

The exuberance that followed the diplomatic triumph immediately gave way to grounded realism as the reality sank: the IGAD communique in no way alters the power play on the ground. Having outsourced both the problems of and solutions to Kismaayo to IGAD, President Hassan soon met the agony of a basic political precept: politics is local. Somalia is not an exception. IGAD cannot do much to solve Somalia's internal political crisis; the President must deal with powerful local actors.

All of a sudden, the IGAD scarecrow vanished; only to re-appear as "misbehaving" Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF). More on that later.

Rigging own mind

The IGAD story did its turn, but after the procession, we came back to the basics: a divided Mogadishu (for the Parliament is not united) faces off with a divided Kismaayo (for there are some communities who feel excluded). Everybody else seemed to draw domestic scenarios of how things may unfold: scenarios ranging from Kenyan withdrawal, Al Shabab takeover, clan conflict, compromise etc.

But, Mohamud M Ulusow refused to be distracted and chased the bogeyman that is "IGAD's clan institutionalization" – whichever clan is institutionalized and whatever that means – with pen. We gathered that Mohamud does not want to waste precious time and energy on non-existent domestic ailment, when Somalia's cancer lies across the border.

If the parliament of Somalia is unlikely to agree on motions against IGAD member countries because it is divided along clan lines, and if a house so axiomatically divided cannot stand against foreign aggression, Ulusow does not see it as a problem; or at least, does not consider it fatal enough.

Which makes one wonder: are Somali intellectuals following ignorant and sectarian politicians? Or are they playing politics with and through pliable media? Why do Somali intellectuals rig their own mind? Much worse, why do they invent so many scapegoats if they want to grow their leaders into responsible and accountable actors, in a country whose only salvation lies in finding a competent and visionary leadership?

Glamourizing incompetency

A nation clearly has a problem when writers who constitute the most sensitive part of the national mind follow and depend on the news of a divided media to frame intellectual discourse. A nation has a problem when intellectuals become so enchanted with manifestly incompetent leadership as to be so dogmatic? Mohamud Ulusow must read Valdimir Jankelevitch, who wrote a lot on irony, dogma, cynicism and how they relate to telling the truth to power.

Writers must not suspend standard moral questions leaders must answer. If things are not going well in Somalia, clearly it is because many people will be doing things wrong, but who takes the primary responsibility? IGAD or own political leadership? Whose job it is to get IGAD in line? Of course not by shouting in big meetings but by devising effective strategies and forging working partnerships? If IGAD is deceiving our leaders – by saying something and doing something else – how do we accept that our leaders to be such easy victims of elementary honey-traps of international politics without infantilizing them? Without accepting that they are so grossly incompetent as not even to be capable of knowing when they are cheated? What kind of leaders do we want? Naïve or competent?

The terminal disease

Despite the sidetracks and erroneous externalization, Somalia's terminal disease has been and remains internal. That terminal disease is not mutual clan animosity and mistrust. This happens elsewhere. In Kenya; in Ethiopia; in India; in Brazil. It is not marauding neighboring countries. It is not constitutional ambiguity. It is not federalism or centralism, for few actually grasp the real meaning of these concepts. It is leadership crisis and our inability to hold our leaders accountable. Because authority does not engender responsibility, our leaders can always count on the support of a fawning base that glamourizes incompetency solely because it afflicts a political figure they support.

We need to break from this tradition. Our intellectuals should have been able to reframe the narratives that ignorant media and sectarian politicians sell. Regrettably, they continue to frame political issues and events in the old simplistic, Manichean fashion of who-is-against-who. The question ought to have been what is wrong; not which side is wrong.

Results not Efforts

Our leaders do not take responsibility when they fail to deliver. There are enough scapegoats: IGAD, Sheikh Madoobe, Faroole, Silaanyo, Hailemariam, United Nations, whatever. None of these individuals

and entities presented themselves as Somalia Presidential candidates in September 2012, which therefore, means none of them are to take the blame if Somalia's future imitates its recent history. Of course, all of these people and entities can contribute to what goes wrong, but in the end, it is the national leadership, which is entrusted to steer the country through this turbulent times, that is responsible.

There is an Executive President who trusted his skills and ran for office to bring Somalia back. It is up to him to surmount challenges – of which the scarecrows and scapegoats mentioned are part of. The culture of running to high offices headlong with no proven track record, and then panting midway and looking for excuses must stop. Those who take leadership positions must deliver or leave the place for those who can deliver. Leaders should be judged on results not efforts or intentions.

Failures and fatal misspeaks

President Hassan can recover and still steady the rocking boat, but too many things have already gone wrong.

First, ten months after the election of President Hassan, the country is polarized in a manner unseen in recent years. Echoes of war hang over the nation. Clannish vitriol is pervading the daily discourse; even at the national parliament. The President did not create this problem. But his misspeaks and the ungainly utterances of his closest advisors fueled the mistrust. Puntland is sulking ever since the President's ideologically firm, intellectually feeble advisors spread the "Majeerteen-fatigue" gossip during the selection of the Prime Minister. A whole community, which supported President Hassan's election, felt targeted and threatened.

The President or his advisors have also knowingly or inadvertently created a siege mentality among their base. This mentality incited his support base. If the President wants to bring clans together, he will have to first convince his base that he is the President for all Somalis and that his base should not feel targeted when the President faces problems as the national leader. He should tell them that abuse comes with the territory. And therefore, he should not seek succor from them even when cornered. It may be true some powerful clans are opposing the President because of his identity and not his actions, but it is a mark of a true national leader to take abuse and reign on his own base for the common good.

Second, there is no progress on Somalia-Somaliland talks. In truth, Somaliland is getting more belligerent and intransigent. The President took plenty of carrots and no sticks to Turkey for the Somalia-Somaliland talks. It defies logic why a whole political leader expects moral appeals to move entrenched political positions. The President should have sent a signal to Somaliland by empowering nationalists from the North, while at the same time accommodating the concerns of the Somaliland government. On the other hand, in Kismaayo, people who could have been a natural ally of the national government were turned into unruly clique, by confronting them with too many sticks and no real carrots. Somalia has a leadership which uses sticks where carrots are required and carrots where sticks are due.

Third, soon after President Hassan was elected, I wrote: *“President Hassan may have an ample experience in political activism. But it is strategic politics, not political activism, that make things done. The extent to which President Hassan will be able to translate his activist experience into strategic politics inside and outside the country will determine his political longevity and yield.”*

Ten months later, it is clear that the President did not translate his activism into strategic politics; on the contrary, he is fully immersed in political activism. Both at home and in the region, the President is losing potential friends, as the result. Political activism is not for palaces, it is for offices of civil societies. A case in point is how the President handled the issue of ‘misbehaving’ Kenyan Defense Forces. The President showed his hand too soon. It is a cardinal law of diplomacy and international politics that intemperate messages are to be delivered through subordinates so that later adjustments and possibilities are not foreclosed.

What the Foreign Minister or a senior diplomat could have leaked to the media to bring Kenya’s attention to the matter, the President spoke on the stage of African Union. It may be fair; it may be patriotic, heroic even. But it is political activism at its best. Political activism goes with the era of student politics. It is titillating, but it does not deliver. It is strategic politics that Somalia requires today. If some – not all of Kenyan soldiers in Somalia, to quote the President’s own words – misbehaved, would it not have been better to seek administrative redress through the Somalia Defense Ministry, rather than antagonize an ally you need for the time being? More so, when your own family lives in the country you are accusing! Why make an administrative matter a foreign policy issue?

Fourth, the President is behaving as a normal President in an abnormal country. A government can only be a government when it has “a monopoly on violence” and when it can provide services to its subjects. The Somali Government neither has a monopoly on violence, nor can enforce its decisions, nor does it provide services to all of its citizens. It cannot therefore demand the same loyalty and compliance proper governments require from their citizens. Yet, President Hassan expects his orders to be implemented without reluctance.

The President plays bulldozer politics when he has no bulldozers at his backyard – unless he is going to mobilize his clan, which will reduce him to a clan warlord. There is no unified Somali military that can enforce his political decisions. His own office relies on the protection of Ugandan soldiers. The President still believes offering Ahmed Madoobe a governor position is a “gigantic compromise”, completely oblivious to the fact that the parameters of the political conflict over Kismaayo have mutated from where they were when Ahmed Madoobe turned down the same offer some months ago. Madoobe feels threatened; he is also no longer an ambitious militia leader. He is a man followed by a large clan constituency which will not be satisfied with titles that are conferred on Sheikh Madoobe.

The President, for once, has not entertained the idea of recognizing Sheikh Madoobe and the Jubaland administration as a way of diffusing the current tension, and working through Madoobe to correct what went wrong. After all, the Federal Government will only be able to consolidate power when it is

sufficiently strong, not now. The government thinks if Jubaland gets away with this, their one-fit-for-all top down template comes under threat in other areas. That is what happens when you detour from the path of pragmatism, and reason with dogma. That is what you reap when you practice doctrinite politics, which is about convictions and not realism. Surely, contingency plans, flexibilities and anomalies are allowed and probably a must in a fragile country recovering from two decades of state collapse.

And by the way, why is this “we-appoint-a governor-who-leads-the-establishment-of-regional-states” being treated like a verse from the holy Quran? Where is it coming from? What happens if that formula is not used? Why fail to function outside own political predilections? Why fail to look for creative solutions?

Fifth, President Hassan believes that “expiation speeches”, of the type Gramsci says only helps in momentarily diverting attention from the core problems of society, will help him reorient the nation. The President emphasizes the need for rebuilding governance structures, but isn’t that putting the cart before the horse when no meaningful national healing has taken place? Also is politics not about interests? How and where do moral appeals substitute shrewd politics?

Sixth, as Abukar Arman observed there is a perception problem, and the President should have managed it properly. Instead, more perception problems are being created. It does not help when Ahmed Diriye and Mohamed Hassan Haad champion the Government’s position. The Government is for all, but Somalis conflate the Government with the President. Perception and reality are indistinguishable and often interchangeable in politics.

The President has lost a lot of political capital and momentum but still has time to reverse the course of his politics. Clearly, allowing regions to vent their frustrations on a Mogadishu-centered government by pretending to be ruling from the center is not a great idea. The Hiiraan community has already started what is brewing to be the rule rather than the exception. Allowing communities to set up their own local administrations will offer insurance against the fracas created by Hiiraan elders this week. The whole philosophy that underpins the current regime’s approach to center-region relations is fatally misguided. Why concentrate power in the center when the center cannot control nor provide services to the peripheries, thereby exposing the center to the anger and disappointments of the peripheries?

I have not offered solutions to all of the problems I raised. But I have tried to focus the current national debate on the causative factor of leadership, lest we get distracted or confused by sideshows. For when we raise the right questions, is when we will get the right answers.

As Professor Ahmed Ismail Samatar noted, three factors precipitated and perpetuate Somalia’s catastrophe: (a) the dissipation of civic belonging or *Somalinimo*, (b) the pulverization of national institutions—at the center of which is the state – and (c) the total absence of visionary, legitimate, and competent leadership. These factors are not mutually exclusive or linearly connected; there is a cause and effect relationship between the three factors. However, I contend that only when we get (c) right will we be able to get (b) and (a) right. The current political crisis in Somalia is the result of a crisis of command.

Somalia: A Crisis of Command: By Muktar M Omer
Copyright © 2013 WardheerNews, All rights reserved

